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Spaces and transmitters of change in the Middle-East: transnationalism as an antidote to the limitations of nationalism

Introduction

Serge Weber

This special issue is largely inspired in spirit by the collective works of the ANR research team SYSREMO (Regional Integration Systems in the Middle-East), led by Leïla Vignal from the ESO research unit (UMR) at Rennes 2 University. Five of its members are featured here as authors. I would like to thank the team for its support in the elaboration of this issue.

- 1 Attempting a geography of change means presuming that the eye can grasp challenges to the established order, and that these actions imply a specific spatial setting or that space is the object of the confrontation. Change involves processes of emancipation, protest and proposition, as well as a refusal of the same and a desiring imagination geared towards a different future. A “geography of social change” is an invitation to adopt diverse points of view in order to understand the link between political action and structural transformations that have affected ways of life, social stratifications and uses of space over different timescales (Pagès-El Karoui, 2012).
- 2 The events experienced since 2009 by tens of millions of people in countries like Iran, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Algeria, Yemen, Oman, Syria and Turkey have inspired observations and elaborate interpretations from around the world, where terms like “springs” or “revolutions” were associated with the names of iconic urban centers such as Taksim or Tahrir. Urban research on the region has taken a new turn, with the emergence in those countries of critical currents of urban research, and increased attention paid to the evolution of working-class neighborhoods in the context of the revolutions (Barthel, Monqid, 2011; Barthel, Jaglin, 2013). A lot has been written on the youth, its education and its lifestyle, highlighting a growing gap with the repressive forces in place (Bonney, Catusse, 2013). The study of public spaces – whether virtual or very literally urban –,

considered both as a stage and a stake for powers and counter powers, has considerably grown. The protesters have been considered as transmitters of change towards another possible world, in countries where censorship and conservatism go hand in hand with neoliberalism in its now classic forms (privatization, real estate speculation, privileges and gated communities), but also with tourism and consumerism, which have drastically transformed landscapes and urban practices (Vignal, 2007; 2010).

Questioning the “transnational”: what nation is there to be transcended?

- 3 The Near and Middle East is the area where the question of transnationalism poses itself the most acutely. The revolutions of the last few years – some of them still ongoing, for instance in Egypt or Syria - have been the culmination of protest movements whose ideas have circulated between countries, challenging the regimes in place. After becoming broadly accepted in the field of migration studies (Glick Schiller, Basch, Szanton Blanc, 1992; Levitt, Waters, 2002), the concept of transnationalism has emerged in the field of social science (Waldinger, Fitzgerald, 2004). Although transnational activism has been particularly vibrant, it still struggles to translate into the institutional level; although transnational and migrant communities are active, many migrants are still considered as second-class citizens. The articles in this issue bring updated interpretations of the transnational by focusing on almost invisible, everyday ramifications of the societal changes at work in the region.
- 4 In order to understand the rebellions that have taken place, we need to look back to the periods of incorporation of the nation (Aidi, 2008). The construction of the nation has usually occurred in reverse of social, political and demographic realities: societies everywhere are multi-religious and multi-ethnic, with strong class barriers between the upper classes (businesspeople and/or land-owners), a vast educated but poor working class, and multiple middle class segments that aspire to conformism and internationalism but live at threat of poverty. Additionally, urbanization, education, the demographic transition and economic liberalization reforms have brought about deep cultural changes (Pagès-El Karoui, Vignal, 2011).
- 5 Indeed, a close look is necessary to fully understand each party's interests. Within “globalized Islam” (Roy, 2002), the radicalization of Islam is not just the prerogative of the working class: it originates in student circles before reaching the working class as well as qualified professionals, bourgeois salons and the moneyed youth, where the “islamo-business” is championed by religious entrepreneurs with a footing in the small bourgeoisie (Haenni, Tjitske, 2002). Reversely, the opposition to radical Islam is not the preserve of an intellectual elite: it brings together diverse social backgrounds, as shown by the success of “protest hip-hop”: vocal detractors of religious and patriotic conformism are also to be found amongst the working classes (Aidi, 2011).
- 6 The national idea, which has been forcefully and forcibly asserted since the late 19th century, has often (but not always) emanated from the thought currents and ideologies of anti-colonial resistance. In the Arab world, the idea of nation has this in particular that it automatically implies two levels: that of the nation-State, and that of the Arab region or world (Carré, 2004; Copeaux, 1997). In the past, Pan-Arabism has favored the emergence of hegemonic Ba’ath parties (in Syria, in Iraq) where minorities have played an active

part. However, this hasn't prevented the minorities – in particular minority Muslim traditions – from accumulating frustration. In Turkey, Egypt, Syria and monarchy-era Iran, the detraditionalization of Islam was deliberately imposed for decades in the name of Westernization, modern secularism and for the sake of good relations with Western countries. Policies aimed at strengthening education in schools and universities went from national development to an increasing porosity to the global models of neoliberal higher education. However, nationalism – and more generally identity-based divisions – have appeared everywhere as a convenient tool for domination and for the coercion of anti-establishment movements, whether those are political (communist parties for instance), religious or cultural (claims to cultural, linguistic and civic rights by oppressed and discriminated against minorities). The nation's unity, associated with the army's hegemonic role in political and economic life and with the fabrication of one or more external enemies, has indeed served to consolidate economic growth – and sometimes development – policies. However, it has durably locked all attempts at a pluralist political dialogue, and thus affected the sustainability of the regimes in place. As for the groups supporting states whose existence is being denied, they necessarily feed into transnational spaces – whether those social, political or economical, trans-border or diasporic: this is first and foremost the case for Palestinian or Kurdish spaces, for which the idea of a nation-State remains a strong aspiration.

Emerging movements from the grassroots and the margins

- 7 Diverse links have been formed throughout the Middle-Eastern space, creating mutual dependencies between different stakeholders, whether those are groups or individuals. Although cultural affinities have made circulation easier, the divisions that compartmentalize the region make it necessary to adopt a critical outlook on such regional units as the Middle East, the Near East or the sum of the two. Those are the result of a very Euro-centric and historically dated geostrategic division of the world, which has been kept alive throughout the 20th century to serve the Western powers' strategic interests on their favorite playing field. What is emerging here is a regional cohesion based on “grassroots” transnational links (Tarrius, 1992; Portes, 1997), providing a platform for the opinion of numerous and active transmitters – including male and, increasingly so, female migrants (Berthomière, Doraï, De Tapia, 2003 ; Cheikh, Péraldi, 2009). Those links are inspired by a spirit of emancipation and subversion. Some of them reflect forms of resistance to the hegemony of the state-nation – whether it be based on religion, the army, conservative morals or on an external enemy.
- 8 Of course international relations, diplomatic ideologies and international cooperation have been trying to work around those links – as shown by Kerem Öktem in his study of the tribulations of Turkish neo-Ottomanism, and by Jean-François Drevet who looks into the role of natural resources in the cooperation between different states that struggle to find common interests.
- 9 Transgressions of the borders and of attempts to control international mobility can be observed wherever those controls stand in the way of exchange: this can lead to trans-border forms of political autonomization. Cyril Roussel analyses this phenomenon in his paper on the consolidation of the Kurdish space, where the underground movement goes

along with an emerging administration and a form of political regulation driven by competing political parties. Kurdistan is being built transnationally, within – and in spite of – the countries where the Kurds are a minority. In that respect, points of crossing at the Syrian or Iranian border with the Iraqi Kurdistan region provide remarkable vantage points for observing change.

- 10 Roman Stadnicki and Benoît Montabone's papers show how urban order is a crucial issue in terms of change, whether in Cairo or in Istanbul: the confiscation of urban public spaces and memories by the authorities goes along with revived claims to a right to the city, with protestors demanding for this right to be reinstated (Tzfadia, Yacobi, 2009; 2011). From this perspective, new urban management and neoliberal urbanism reveal the connection between the assertion of power and the objectification of the city. Clashes and confrontations confirm the necessity of de-Westernizing urban thought (Ferguson, 2006; Endesor, Jayne, 2012; Choplin, 2012): urban activists are the transmitters of new ways of thinking.

Queering, gender and the performative body

- 11 In most countries in the area, social order is based on dogmatic morals, whether secular to the point of intolerance or religious to the point of exclusivity. For a number of people, claiming sexual freedom for themselves constitutes an important part of everyday life. This is an old story: there have been many attempts, hidden or open, at legitimating sexual liberation and rejecting patriarchal order. Frank Mermier draws a parallel between two experiences of erotic publishing featuring male or female nudity in Beirut during two distinct historical periods: the study shows how any attempt at openly resisting the sexual order is hindered by the power of conformism and censorship.
- 12 A lot has been written about the negotiation of assigned gender roles – with a focus on women, looking at how they work their way around clothing constraints or restrictions in accessing public space (Gillot, Barthe, Hancock, 2005; De Koning, 2009; Drenberger, 2010; Saïdi-Sharouz, Guérin-Pace, 2011), or on gender performativity in the workplace (Secor, 2003) – but also on masculinity (Rebucini, 2009). Such negotiations have been considered a “patriarchal barter” (Sharp, Briggs J., Yacoub, Hamed, 2003) where resistance and emancipation eventually have to compromise in exchange for being allocated a role – a notion that strongly challenges the acceptability of gender allocation (Cheikh, 2011). For instance, furtive transgressions are often seen as youthful errors, which are tolerated in practice once the young people's compliance with social order has been ascertained, in spite of a public and private dramatization of deviance. This is exemplified by Laure Assaf in an anthropology of making out in car parks and shopping malls in the Emirates. Dissimulation acts as a basis for sociability and individualization, while transgressing both parental space and public space: strategies for encounters, contact and acting out are invented, whose value is in proportion with the prominence of the interdiction weighing on those acts (Le Renard, 2013). These transgressive imaginations indicate both a performance of emancipation in public space – with all the thrill associated to it –, but also at an implicit acceptance of the rules, both in the choice of the partner and in the deprecation of the act of “making out”. The shopping malls are the spaces that best embody economic power and the consumerist paradigm: they become spaces of respectability and tolerance. What matters in these acts is first and foremost the reproduction of capital, whether symbolic or social. It seems as if individual emancipation

can be little more than a background noise, as long as social privileges are not affected and the consumerist order remains intact.

- 13 As for sexual minorities, the transnational dimension is key in LGBT (lesbian, gay, bi and transsexual) activism and sociability. It has brought about deep transformations in the region's moral geography, feeding into *queer* approaches (Rouhani, 2009). Acting out in public spaces can lead to phenomena of *exit* (i.e. tourism or emigration towards cities where pleasure can be experienced in the open such as Istanbul, Beirut or even Dubai) and create temporary centralities, either invisible or on the contrary highly visible, as shown by Marie Bonte in her geography of nightlife in Beirut. Interactions between the figure of the "cosmopolitan gay" and ideas of homonationalism or homoerotic exoticism (Massad, 2007), together with the global character of gay encounters, connects those to consumerism, with the rise of a touristic economy in its own right, and to micro-politics, when it comes to concrete interactions with repression or censorship authorities. The diasporic dimension brings together those different aspects, with the emergence of a "homopolitical" posture (Shakhsari, 2012) and participation in collective – and not just minority-led – political action, as shown by Kerem Öktem looking at the case of Istanbul.
- 14 In cities where sexual normativity and gender assignments are predominant, public space has become a stage for a performativity of resistance, which can be discreet or more vocal. Pleasure becomes a geographic parameter in its own right: the tactics of accessing it have created original models of visibility and mobility practices.

Individual trajectories and social divides

- 15 The question of the individual is central to this special issue. According to Lucile Grüntz, the singularity of each migratory path helps transcend the dualism between domination and emancipation. Indeed in social sciences, the interpretative opposition between on the one hand social relations of domination and on the other focus on the individual subject is transcended by individual experiences of migration. Grüntz analyses closely those experiences in three different social backgrounds in Egypt: a yuppie, a social dropout and a rebel working in Abu Dhabi. Migratory trajectories are affected by divides between class or between here and back home, even within one given migrant or cosmopolitan group. In this respect, being admitted as a member of the cosmopolitan or international club is a learning process, which can be endangered by class habitus: social relations of domination or relegation can't just be swept aside. However, each individual's experience of these relations in their migration makes their stories particularly valuable, with the subject gradually becoming aware of class mechanics.
- 16 Cosmopolitanism (understood as a trans-nationalization of the symbolic referents of distinction), a phenomenon which has dramatically transformed the region's societies (Peterson, 2011), operates as a social marker and a tool for operating symbolic violence upon those who do not have access to it: this idea is pushed to a paroxysm by Delphine Pagès-El Karoui in her study of the literary dystopia presented by an Egyptian best-seller.
- 17 Attention to the individual is essential for empirical approaches that aim to remain both pragmatic and empathetic. It also acts as a subjective prism through which to understand experiences of freedom. Subversive action would be impossible without some degree of self-awareness and without the construction of an individual trajectory: this is facilitated by the existence of a discourse on subjectivity and the singularity of experience.

However, the individual is also present on a collective level, for instance in Claudia de Martino's focus on an atypical neighborhood of Jerusalem, Musrara, where migratory memory and urban memory work together to make its inhabitants different from other citizens and city dwellers. This case is representative of the trajectories of neighborhoods where immigration is combined with a transformation of social divisions of space, and where discriminations crop up where they are the least expected (Martin, Pérouse, 2011; Tzfadia, Yacobi, 2009).

- 18 Transnational communities and spaces of circulation are crisscrossed by a kaleidoscope of stratifications and social divides: this is illustrated by Amin Moghadam, who uses an original case taken from the area "between the two banks" of the Arab-Persian Gulf. Moghadam concludes on the importance of the administrative status and historicity of state-nation constructs in the structuring of a transnational social space: this brings new elements to discussions around the question of the transnational grid. For instance, benefactors from Southern Iran who lavish private funds on their hometowns for building mosques or universities for the sake of their private prestige are increasingly becoming caught in collective political institutionalization, and embodying democratic and identity resistance to the central power.
- 19 As we have seen, the articles presented in this issue bring together diverse lines of enquiry that reveal multiple potentialities, in order to refine and refresh geography's outlook on the region – with the added value of combining the approaches of different disciplines. Individual freedom should not be a vain word: by choosing it as an object of study and looking into people's struggle to obtain, we must not ignore the issue raised by the individual, the subject and political liberalism in an authoritarian regime, in situations of extreme domination, relegation and ostracism. Academic critique has a lot to learn from the activists themselves in terms of shifting away from the center: democratic transition can not always conform with the Western model, as shown by the example of Iran. The emancipation of women and sexual minorities should inspire us to apply a critical combination of *queer* approaches to the conformist power of economic liberalism.
- 20 Whether they are workers or students, migrants or residents, women or men, gay or heterosexual, activists or tourists, publishers or smugglers, the transmitters are working at the margins, out in the open or under cover. Using rational thinking and systems of knowledge to work their way around the different forms of repression and subvert them, they activate the transnational scale and connect it to a movement of societal change stemming from the grassroots.

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